

Introduction

The Regional Association of West Quebecers (RAWQ) is a community organization serving the English-speaking community in the Outaouais region since 1994. Our organization provides a variety of services to the community, including but not exclusive to, information and referral, a New Residents Program, employability programs, French second-language training, cultural activities and communication services as well as representation on issues involving municipal, provincial and federal authorities.

Our community has grown considerably since the first settlers were brought here by Philemon Wright in 1800. Our community has 70,880 members and represents 18.7% of the region's population. Our numbers vary in strength from 35% in the City of Aylmer, to 60% in the Pontiac (rural area), which remains as one of the few Census Divisions where the official-language minority population represents a local majority. The English-speaking community has grown between 1996 and 2016 by 32%, which is a higher rate than that of Francophones in the region (22%) and of Anglophones across Québec (19%). The Outaouais is now home to the 4th largest English-speaking community in Québec, after Montreal, Laval and the Montérégie. Immigrants represent 26% of the English-speaking community in the region of which 53% are visible minorities.

The Act

The community perspective on the *Official Languages Act* is that it is good on paper but doesn't substantively affect our daily lives. The perception of the legislation by Monsieur et Madame Tout le Monde in our community is that it was created to make access for Francophones to the federal civil service. Most of the community don't even know it exists or what it is supposed to accomplish. In fact, when it comes to language issues the English-speaking community in Québec feels abandoned by the federal government.

The average member of our community does not feel protected by the *Act* nor do they feel the legislation protects our institutions, culture, language or community vitality. The community sees a continual decline of enrolment in our English schools, increased difficulty in accessing health and social services in our language and a total lack of concern on the part of municipal authorities about rendering service to the English population in their language. As such, the people in our community are wondering just where the Canadian government is when it comes to the concerns of the English linguistic minority in Québec.

The perception of the community is that the equality of the status of English and French is only in the text and not in its implementation. Our members feel that the many years of consultations with the *Commission*, have resulted in very few meaningful changes or advances for our community on language issues. Our community organizations feel that the consultation process is merely a process used by the government, to create the false impression that the number of groups they meet is

commensurate to its commitment to the English linguistic minority in Québec. In fact, the unfortunate incident that occurred in Sherbrooke, when the Prime Minister refused to respond in English to questions posed to him in English, or when some of our local MP's on similar occasions won't address their constituents in English, only serves to underscore the lack of confidence the community has in the *Act* and belies the meaning of the words outlined in its principal tenets.

To that end we wholeheartedly support the Quebec Community Groups Network, calling upon the government of Canada in its review of the *Official Languages Act*, to effect the following changes to the existing legislation;

- As in the current *Act*, the central guiding principle must be the **equality of status of English and French**. There can be no separate status or approach for each language. Further, the *Act* must categorically guarantee this equality of status in all institutions subject to the *Act* across Canada.
- Two additional key features that must animate the *Act* are:
 1. **Substantive Equality:** In its implementation, the *Act* must enable adaptation to the specific contexts and needs of the different official language minority communities.
 2. **Capacity, Consultation, and Representation:** The *Act* should provide for robust, mandatory, and properly-resourced consultation at all levels, including a formal mechanism for consultation at the national level.

Our community in the Outaouais is unique in Québec and Canada in that the Francophone community is one of the most bilingual of Official Language majorities in the country, which could have important implications for the vitality of the English-speaking community in the region. However, in a paper prepared for us by a Senior Researcher for the Official Languages Branch of Canadian Heritage, it stated:

“Further analysis may show some important differences between the urban and rural English-speaking populations which would indicate that differential development strategies are required to support community vitality in the region. In a major study at the Department of Canadian Heritage which considered more than 150 statistical and institutional measures of official-language minority communities across Canada, the English speakers of the Outaouais region showed high or very high vitality, ranking in the highest (5th) quintile for most composite indicators. The dimension that differs importantly from these generally healthy observations was that in the socio-economic sphere where English speakers in the Outaouais region displayed very low socio-economic vitality when compared to other Official Language minorities across the country, ranking in the 1st (lowest) quintile”.

As such, we also support the QCGN’s call for the following measures to be included in the legislation to enhance the vitality of minority language communities:

- a. Include clear definitions of “positive measure”, “enhancing the vitality of”, and “assisting in the development of” official language minority communities;
- b. Provide clearer lines of accountability for the obligations set out in Part VII;
- c. Require regulations to implement Part VII;
- d. Place strict transparency mechanisms in the *Act* to account for official languages investments;
- e. Create official languages obligations attached to all activities funded by federal resources;
- f. Require that all federal-provincial/territorial agreements be made in both official languages and be equally authoritative.

2016 Census data demonstrated the English-speaking community is fairing less well than its French-speaking counterpart outside of Québec and have a lower median income than the Francophone majority which is unique in Canada aside from New Brunswick. A recent study done by the Association of Canadian Studies noted that English-speakers faced greater barriers to employment as Francophones were 60% more likely to be contacted for job interviews than those with Anglophone sounding names. Allophones and visible minorities (many of whose first official language learned is English) fared even less well as their unemployment rate hovers around 13% compared to 5% for Francophones and 7.5% for the English-speaking community.

Clearly, different and adapted and positive measures must be inscribed in the Act to address these inequalities particularly when

it comes to employment in the federal civil service. Our community has made tremendous strides in acquiring French language skills over the last 40 years since Law 101 where now 72% of our community is functionally bilingual and over 85% for those under 54 years of age. Despite this fact the employment rate of our community in federal agencies and federally managed enterprises remains lower than it should be given the capacity of the community to serve the majority in their language. Bilingual Anglophones also fare less well than their bilingual counterparts in other territories of the country.

Conclusion

The Regional Association of West Quebecers shares many of the same views as some of our partners that have presented prior to today such as the Quebec English School Board Association (QESBA), the Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN) and the aforementioned QCGN. Our members are negatively impacted by many of the issues they have raised and support the solutions they have offered like

- a) An expectation that there will be equality of status of English and French in the Act, not only in the text, but in its implementation. This includes equal attention being paid to the vitality of your English-speaking communities.
- b) Calling for clarification of the term, the imposition of specific responsibilities on institutions to consult, and provide the resources to communities to be effective and engaged partners.

- c) Demanding services be accessible and be delivered in a way that makes them substantively equivalent to services that would be provided in a face to face encounter.
- d) Demanding transparency and accountability on federal funds transferred to the province for our community particularly in Education.

We like the CHSSN model where the resources are controlled by the community and the community is involved in developing the services offered by the institutions to our community. We believe that articles IV through VII cannot be viewed or implemented in silos as they are all inextricably connected to the protection of our minority linguistic rights and the continued vitality of our language, our culture and our communities. We firmly believe the Act requires an oversight mechanism like a National Advisory Committee accompanied by a tribunal (perhaps in the Privy Council) with the power to implement sanctions. We also believe that consultation with linguistic minorities should be a mandatory clearly defined process accompanied by appropriate financial resources to increase their respective capacities to interact and collaborate with the federal government on all elements of the Official Languages Act.

Thank you